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ABSTRACT

This digest reports recent findings on violent television content, highlights the recently developed television ratings system, and offers suggestions for parental mediation of children's television viewing. The National Television Violence Study has demonstrated that not all violence is equal. Certain plot elements in portrayals of violence are considered high risk for children and should be evaluated by parents. Characterizations in which the perpetrator is attractive are especially problematic because viewers may identify with such a character. Other high-risk factors include showing violence as being justified, going unpunished, and having minimal consequences to the victim. Realistic violence is also among the high-risk plot elements. Based on reviews of social science research, it is possible to predict some effects of violent viewing in conjunction with specific plot elements, including: (1) aggressive behavior; (2) fearful attitudes about the real world; and (3) desensitization to violence. However, just as not all violence is equal, there are distinctions to be made among viewers. Characteristics such as age, experience, cognitive development, and temperament should be considered as individual factors that can interact with the viewing of violent content. To help parents determine the appropriateness of television programs, a ratings system has been developed by the television industry in collaboration with child advocacy organizations. In addition, the following suggestions may help parents reduce the negative effects of viewing television in general and violent television in particular: (1) watch television with your children to monitor what they are watching and to discuss aspects of the programs; (2) turn the program off if a portrayal is upsetting and discuss the reasons for doing so; (3) limit viewing; (4) use television program guides or a VCR for planning and screening viewing; and (5) encourage children to be critical of messages they encounter when watching television. (LPP)

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# Television Violence: Content, Context, and Consequences

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Social science research conducted over the past 40 years supports the conclusion that viewing violent television programming has negative consequences for children, and the research suggests three areas in which watching violent television programs can impact young viewers:

1. Media violence can encourage children to learn aggressive behavior and attitudes.
2. Media violence can cultivate fearful or pessimistic attitudes in children about the non-television world.
3. Media violence can desensitize children to real-world and fantasy violence.

According to Eron (1992), "(t)here can no longer be any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime, and violence in society. The evidence comes from both the laboratory and real-life studies. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socio-economic levels and all levels of intelligence. The effect is not limited to children who are already disposed to being aggressive and is not restricted to this country" (p. 1).

This digest reports recent findings on violent television content, highlights the recently developed television ratings system, and offers suggestions for parental guidance and mediation of children's viewing of television programs.

## Not All Violence Is Equal

The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) is the largest study of media content ever undertaken. It is a three-year study that assesses the amount, nature, and context of violence in entertainment programming, examines the effectiveness of ratings and advisories, and reviews televised anti-violence educational initiatives. The study, which began in 1994 and is funded by the National Cable Television Association, defines television violence as "any overt depiction of the use of physical force—or credible threat of physical force—intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being or group that occur as a result of unseen violent means" (National Television Violence Study, Executive Summary, 1996, p. ix).

Not all violence is equal, however. While some violent content can convey an anti-violence message, it is typical to sanitize, glamorize, or even glorify violence on U.S. television. According to the National Television Violence Study (Federman, 1997), only 4% of programs coded had a strong anti-violence theme in the 1995-96 season. In the two years of the study that have been reported, 58% (1994-95) and 61% (1995-96) of programs coded contained some violence.

Certain plot elements in portrayals of violence are considered high risk for children and should be evaluated by parents when judging possible program effects for children. Characterizations in which the perpetrator is attractive are especially problematic because viewers may identify with such a character. Other high-risk factors include showing violence as being justified, going unpunished, and having minimal consequences to the victim. Realistic violence is also among the high-risk plot elements.

NTVS findings from 1995-96 indicate that these high-risk plot elements abound in U.S. broadcast and cable television. Of all violent acts, 40% were committed by attractive characters, and 75% of violent actions went unpenalized and the perpetrators showed no remorse. In 37% of the programs, the "bad guys" were not punished, and more than half of all violent incidents did not show the suffering of the victim.

Based on reviews of social science research, it is possible to predict some effects of violent viewing in conjunction with specific plot elements:

*Aggressive Behavior.* Learning to use aggressive behavior is predicted to increase when the perpetrator is attractive, the violence is justified, weapons are present, the violence is graphic or extensive, the violence is realistic, the violence is rewarded, or the violence is presented in a humorous fashion. Conversely, the learning of aggression is inhibited by portrayals that show that violence is unjustified, show perpetrators of violence punished, or show the painful results of violence.

*Fearful Attitudes.* The effects of fearful attitudes about the real world may be increased by a number of features, including attractive victims of violence; unjustified violence; graphic, extensive, or realistic violence; and rewards to the perpetrator of violence. According to the work of George Gerbner and his colleagues (1980), heavy viewers of violent content believe their world is meaner, scarier, and more dangerous than their lighter-viewing counterparts. When violence is punished on television, the expected effect is a decrease in fearful attitudes about the real world.

*Desensitization.* Desensitization to violence refers to the idea of increased toleration of violence. It is predicted from exposure to extensive or graphic portrayals and humorous portrayals of violence and is of particular concern as a long-term effect for heavy viewers of violent content. Some of the most violent programs are children's animated series in which violence is routinely intended to be funny, and realistic consequences of violence are not shown.

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### Viewer Differences

Just as not all violence is equal, there are distinctions to be made among viewers. Characteristics such as age, experience, cognitive development, and temperament should be considered as individual factors that can interact with the viewing of violent content. Very young children, for example, have an understanding of fantasy and reality different from that of older children and adults. They may be more frightened by fantasy violence because they do not fully understand that it is not real. When parents consider their children's viewing, both age and individual differences should be taken into account.

### Using Television Ratings as Guidelines

As a result of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, a ratings system has been developed by the television industry in collaboration with child advocacy organizations. It is currently in use by some of the networks. Eventually ratings will also be used in conjunction with the V-chip, a device that can be programmed to electronically block selected programming. Beginning in 1998, new television sets are to include V-chip technology.

Ratings categories are based on a combination of age-related and content factors as listed below. These ratings may help parents determine what they consider appropriate for their children to watch. However, it is important to consider that ratings may make programs appear more attractive to some children, possibly creating a "forbidden fruit" appeal. Furthermore, critics point out the potentially problematic nature of having the television industry rate its own programs, and these critics support the development of alternative rating systems by non-industry groups.

**TV-Y:** All Children

**TV-Y7:** Directed to Older Children

**TV-G:** General Audience

**TV-PG:** Parental Guidance Suggested

**TV-14:** Parents Strongly Cautioned

**TV-MA:** Mature Audience Only

A content advisory for fantasy violence, **FV,** may be added to the **TV-Y7** rating. Several content codes may be added to the **TV-PG, TV-14,** and **TV-MA** ratings. These are **V** for intense violence; **S** for intense sexual situations; **L** for strong, coarse language; and **D** for intensely suggestive dialogue.

### Beyond Ratings: What Can Parents Do?

Parents can be effective in reducing the negative effects of viewing television in general and violent television in particular.

1. *Watch television with your child.* Not only does watching television with children provide parents with information about what children are seeing, but active discussion and explanation of television programs can increase children's comprehension of content, reduce stereotypical thinking, and increase prosocial behavior.

2. *Turn the program off.* If a portrayal is upsetting, simply turn off the television and discuss your reason for doing so with your child.

3. *Limit viewing.* Set an amount of time for daily or weekly viewing (suggested maximum limit is 2 hours per day), and select programs that are appropriate for the child's age.

4. *Use television program guides or a VCR.* Television program guides can be used to plan and discuss viewing with your child. A VCR is useful for screening programs, building a video library for children, pausing to discuss points, and fast-forwarding through commercials.

5. *Encourage children to be critical of messages they encounter when watching television.* Talking about TV violence gives children alternative ways to think about it. Parents can point out differences between fantasy and reality in depictions of violence. They can also help children understand that in real life, violence is not funny. Discussion of issues underlying what is on the screen can help children to become critical viewers.

### For More Information


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